DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 486 SO 034 469

AUTHOR	Bahmueller, Charles F.
TITLE	Developing an International Framework for Education in Democracy. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-SO-2002-10
PUB DATE	2002-12-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0016
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Bloomington, IN 47408. Tel: 800-266-3815 (Toll Free); Fax: 812-855-0455; e-mail: ericso@indiana.edu. For full text: http://ericso.indiana.edu.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Citizenship; *Citizenship Education; *Democracy; *Global Approach; *International Cooperation; Models; Program Descriptions
IDENTIFIERS	Consensus; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Is it possible to develop an international consensus on the meaning of democracy and education for democratic citizenship? A cooperative project administered by the Center for Civic Education (CCE) in Calabasas, California is attempting to answer this question. Since 1996, the CCE has been developing "An International Framework for Education in Democracy," an international project with advisors and critics from every inhabited continent. This Digest discusses: (1) the purpose of the project to develop the International Framework; (2) the structure and content of the International Framework; and (3) the ongoing process of developing the International Framework. (BT)

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By

Charles F. Bahmueller

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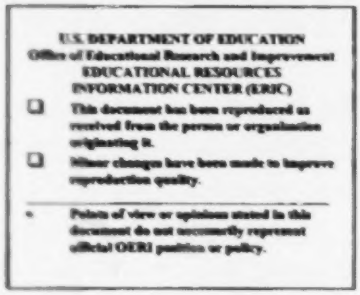
ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Sciences Education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EDO-SO-2002-10 December 2002

Developing An International Framework for Education in Democracy

By Charles F. Bahmueller

Is it possible to develop an international consensus on the meaning of democracy and education for democratic citizenship? A cooperative project administered by the Center for Civic Education (CCE) in Calabasas, California is attempting to answer this difficult and thorny question. Since 1996, the CCE has been developing "An International Framework for Education in Democracy," an international project with advisors and critics from every inhabited continent. This Digest discusses (1) the purpose of the project to develop the International Framework, (2) the structure and content of the International Framework, and (3) the ongoing process of developing the Framework.

Purpose of the International Framework. The purpose of the Framework is to create a generic statement on the meaning of democracy that can be used by educators of any country to prepare students for effective and responsible citizenship in a democracy. Thus, the Framework can be a frame of reference for the development of a curriculum in civics and government. The Framework is not intended to be a complete democracy education program. Rather, it presents the universal concepts at the core of the subject, which will be supplemented in various ways by users in different countries and cultures in order to provide context-specific information about their own political history, institutions, and problems. The Framework is not meant to be a textbook for students. It can, however, serve as a resource for the development of textbooks.

The initiators of the Framework project have recognized the worldwide democratic stirrings and political movements that have arisen during the post-Cold War era. They have noted, however, that many who profess democracy do not share common understandings of it, which can provide a common basis for communication and action. Now, therefore, is a ripe historical moment to attempt a consensus on what democracy is, and how to implement it, from which educators of any country can decide what should be included in civics programs.

Structure and Content of the Framework. The Framework was developed around seven key questions that constitute the structure of this work.

1. What is democracy?
2. Who belongs and who governs in a democracy?
3. Why choose democracy?
4. What characteristics of a society enhance or inhibit democracy?
5. What characteristics of a society facilitate the functioning of a democracy?
6. How do democracies emerge, develop, survive, and improve?
7. How does democracy shape the world and the world shape democracy?

The first part of the Framework discusses the essential characteristics by which a democracy is distinguished from other kinds of governments. All democracies, for example, in order to qualify as "democracies," protect the rights of citizens to freedom of political speech, association, and assembly. They must also regularly hold free, fair, competitive elections of representatives in government in which all citizens (with minor variations) are eligible to vote and run for office. Democracy entails majority rule with protection of the rights of individuals in the minority. There is limited government and the rule of law, anchored in a written or unwritten Constitution, which guarantees equally the rights of all citizens. If a nation claims to practice democracy but its government does not conform to minimal democratic characteristics and rules, its claim lacks merit.

The second part of the Framework deals with the status and roles of the citizen in a democracy. It discusses the relationship of the government to the individual, labeling it a key determinant of the character of any political system. In a democracy, there is government by consent of the governed and accountability of the government to the people. The Framework contrasts democratic citizens—active, independent adults with the right to multiple and overlapping social loyalties of their own choosing—with other systems' treatment of individuals as passive, dependent, child-like subjects whose right to multiple social loyalties is curtailed.

The third part of the Framework sets forth intrinsic and instrumental justifications for democracy. In addition, the Framework gives a detailed enumeration of arguments against democracy. It also points out that democracies include some governmental institutions that do not function democratically, such as much of the judicial branch of government, central banks, and the military. All of these institutions, however, are subject to democratic accountability. Similarly, from families to business corporations, a democratic society contains institutions that do not function according to democratic standards.

The fourth and fifth parts of the Framework ask, in effect, what makes democracy work and how democracies function. In part four, the Framework enumerates characteristics both conducive and detrimental to the well-being of democratic societies and their individual members, social groups and organizations, legal and educational systems, the economy, and government institutions and officials. In part five, the Framework discusses the purposes and functioning of democratic institutions. A detailed account of civil society, the autonomous, voluntarily organized sphere of society not directly controlled by the state, is included. There is also an account of the relationship of state and economy and descriptions of alternative forms of democratic government and institutions.

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In its sixth part, the Framework points to a multitude of factors that allow societies to choose a new political direction. Conditions antecedent to democracy are the spread of literacy; making information and ideas more widely accessible; dissatisfaction with the status quo and dissemination of democratic ideas; a decline of fatalistic attitudes; and economic development sufficient to allow people to look beyond themselves and their present needs. The Framework also points to the necessity of differentiation of persons as individuals rather than as indistinguishable parts of a social organism.

Factors that may prompt fundamental political change range from revolution, economic development, and modernization to opposition movements, international norms, popular demand for participation, accountability, and improvements in daily life. Circumstances that contribute to democratic development are positive economic performance, the evolution of appropriate legal and educational systems, and the rise of civil society, which creates networks of association and communication that energize civic life and disseminate knowledge and ideas. This section concludes with consideration of the citizen's role in the renewal and improvement of democracy. According to one model, democracies may be conceived as having "life cycles." In this view, like living organisms, democracies are born, in the right circumstances they mature, and then they may die. But, the argument proceeds, rather than dying, democracies may regenerate themselves.

The citizen's role in the renewal, self-correction, and ultimate survival of democracy is decisive. For example, citizens can explore and critically question their polity's basic principles and whether they are adhered to. And they can evaluate the extent to which the first principles of democracy are atrophying and act on that evaluation. In general, conscientious citizens ensure that their civic actions reaffirm and are grounded in fundamental democratic values. Effective and responsible citizens are a democracy's grounding and fundament; collectively, they are the force that makes democracy work.

The seventh part of the Framework discusses the complex interplay between democracy and "the world." It asks and discusses, but does not definitively answer, whether democratic values are universal. It also discusses how the concept and practices of democracy shape interactions among the world's nation-states. Finally, the Framework looks at the international conditions that affect the status of democracy, and it discusses the role democratic countries should play in encouraging democracy throughout the world.

Ongoing Development of the Framework. The Framework is being developed by the Center for Civic Education as a joint project of an international network of educators and scholars. It was begun in 1996 when an International Steering Committee composed of scholars and educators was formed for the purpose of reviewing and revising an initial Framework draft. Steering Committee members were drawn from countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Once a first draft of the Framework was constructed, prospective reviewers from throughout the world were contacted and the document was sent for review; the process was repeated several times. Reviewers have included teachers and scholars, national education ministries, and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) from more than 40 countries on six continents.

The Framework can be accessed and downloaded at the World Wide Web site of the Center for Civic Education: <http://www.civiced.org/>.

Colleagues in civic education are invited to review the current draft of "An International Framework for Education in Democracy" and join in developing it by offering constructive criticism to the CCE staff. The final version of the Framework will be published in 2003.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0016. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated.

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